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A WEEK OF MUSIC AND DANCE
AN INTRODUCTION

RANDALL SNYDER

During the second week of April 1999, the Center for Great Plains Studies hosted The Great Plains Music & Dance Festival and Symposium. This undertaking, three years in the planning, co-chaired by Ron Bowlin and myself with suggestions of various committees of local advocates, resulted in a multidisciplinary event which showcased the diversity of our music and dance heritage in the Great Plains. Performances of Plains music and dance ranging from Northern and Southern Native Drums to Jazz, Folk, Gospel and Classical were featured at a variety of venues in Lincoln. This phase of the symposium culminated in a premier of a specially commissioned work celebrating the music of Charlie Parker, *Chasing Bird*, by Danny Grossman and his Toronto-based modern dance company.

Randall Snyder is head of the Composition Department in the School of Music at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and was appointed the school's first Composer-in-Residence in 1996. In addition, Snyder teaches courses in Jazz, Ethnomusicology, and Rock & Roll.

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In addition to these diverse performances, the symposium consisted of twenty-nine scholarly presentations. The topics focused on music and dance in the geographical region of the Canadian and American Plains, and included demonstrations, panel discussions and papers, all subjected to peer review by our committees. Of the papers presented at the conference, four have been selected for this special symposium issue of the *Great Plains Quarterly*.

In "This Week At The Opera House: Popular Musical Entertainment At Great Plains Opera Houses, 1887-1917," Layne Ehlers discusses the importance of the Nebraska small town Opera House as a symbol of status and culture:

> Opera Houses represented a sense of "arrival" for communities which had began only a few years before with wooden false fronts and a makeshift railroad depot. Starting out as converted second floor retail establishment, true ground floor theaters, for economic and aesthetic reasons became the norm by 1900.

Ehlers' research identified 125 extant theaters of which 26 had been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. According to Ehlers, the name "Opera House" was something of a misnomer, as relatively few operas were presented in these theaters. Rather, dances, local entertainment and traveling troupes referred to as "combination companies" or "Lyceum Bureaus"—this referring to musical performances, lectures and specialty acts administered by local high schools or commercial booster clubs as fund raisers—provided the local programming. The heyday of the Opera Houses came to an end with the arrival of "Mr. Edison's moving pictures" and by the time of America's entry into World War 1 the brief history of the Opera Houses was over.

"Powerful Feelings Recollected in Tranquility. Literary Criticism and Lakota Social Song Poetry" by R.D.Theisz, begins by citing several factors which contribute to the lack of critical acceptance of Native American song texts as literature. These include critical bias against oral literary expression, the preference for narrative warrior texts de-emphasizing courtship themes as sub literary, and a perceived lack of formal coherence in song. He counters this prejudice against Native American song poetry as literature common to anthropologists and ethnomusicologists:

> . . . it is important to be aware both of the relatively different aesthetic contexts of the Lakota and Euroamerican critical practice, while recognizing that sufficient commonalties exist to illuminate this special genre of American Great Plains literature and culture.

Theisz next traces the evolution of a specific Lakota rabbit dance-song (in which men and women dance together in a circle and as couples), the earliest version in Lakota, eventually becoming more westernized, and the subtext of the song changing with the gradual inclusion of English words. He ends his paper with a plea for more serious consideration of song texts:

> That the "larger world" will grant them a place in its literary spectrum can only be hoped for as we seek to renovate our ideologies. For . . . these song poems satisfy not only Western literary criteria but, more broadly, meet cross-cultural literary expectations as well.

In his essay entitled "The Musical Landscape of Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," Phil Coleman-Hull explores Ross' allusions to art and music and how these literary allusions illuminate the distinctly different personalities of Mr. and Mrs. Philip Bentley, the main characters of the novel. Coleman-Hull begins by suggesting that Ross' novel is a central document of Canadian prairie fiction, a genre that has been criticized by others for relying too heavily on European models. Coleman-Hull however defends Ross:

> With the musical and artistic references in *As For Me and My House* we discover Ross . . . looking back at the old culture . . . as a way to broaden his audience, make the prairie experience more accessible, and make his Saskatchewan novel part of the larger Canadian-and therefore, Europeancanon.

Throughout the novel, Coleman-Hull notes, Ross inserts references to painters Romney, Gainsborough, El Greco and Gaugin, and composers Lizst, Chopin (and George Sand), Beethoven and Debussy. Specific works help define the novel's characterization including Debussy's *Golliwog* Cakewalk and *The Sunken Cathedral*, the latter, according to Coleman-Hull: "reinforces the sense of exposure felt on the ocean-like prairie."

In the fourth paper, "The Omaha Gospel-Complex in Historical Perspective," Tom Jack documents the introduction and development of gospel music within the African American community of Omaha, Nebraska. His research is primarily based on interviews "focusing on perceptions and descriptions provided by more that fifty of the music's practitioners." Jack begins by sketching the development of the

Black community in Omaha, growing from a population of 13 in 1854 to more than ten thousand by 1920. By 1930 this Nebraska city was home to 43 African-American churches, the most musically ambitious being St. John A.M.E., which accompanied services with an organ, full string section, winds and brass. During this period the most important annual event was the Goodwill Spring Musical. Staged in late April and attracting an audience of several thousand to the City Auditorium, programs devoted to hymns, anthems and spirituals employed a mass choir of as many as 350 singers drawn from both Baptist and Methodist churches. Jack also discusses the professional gospel quartet with its "quartet jamborees." Although the traditional quartets began to die out in the 1960s, they eventually evolved into important male choruses such as the Hub of Harmony 11 of Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church. Jack's work demonstrates the synergistic effect music can have on a community and a culture.

The purpose of the Festival and Symposium was to raise public awareness of the diversity of our music and dance heritage in the Great Plains, and to help people understand that music is an important form of human expression—a celebration of life, whether at a barn dance, a concert hall, a powwow, or in a church. We invite you to read these essays with that spirit in mind.